Managing the Communications

By Don Hall

As some of you will remember, I wrote a three-part series of articles originally called the Power Strategy Tool Kit where I discussed managing the vision, performance, and operations (*L&L* September–November 2003). I decided to tackle another issue I believe equally as important to technology leaders and for educational leaders as a whole. That topic is communications.

Clearly if I were to ask any of you about the importance of effective communications, you would list it near the top of your priorities. However, inevitably when stakeholders are polled about areas where they want their leaders to improve, communication shows up near the top of their concerns. To that end, we will explore some practical ways you can tackle this issue in your department or district.

The Need Exists for All of Us

As technology leaders, we are tasked with managing one of the more complex and costly areas of school operations. Unfortunately, it only continues to increase in both of those aspects. That very fact often makes us the target of sometimes undeserved negative criticism, skepticism, and blatant attacks about the value we provide to our districts. So when budget preparation time rolls around, many of us find ourselves in uncomfortable defensive positions. We regularly have to explain why a particular service or staffing allocation is critical to keeping the department afloat.

I would propose that whether your colleagues or supervisors believe the technology department is valued or important isn't the issue. Instead, they likely do not understand it. Further, it might actually be a case where insufficient ongoing communication occurred throughout the year to assist them in understanding the value technology provided.

Another related factor is that schools and districts are grappling with diminishing resources while trying to respond to increased demands for public accountability. This increased public scrutiny causes educational executives to be more sensitive to all expenditures. They must be able to explain why spending any funds was a good use of public money. So when funding is spent in technology, especially in areas that are not directly related to classroom technology, this is very difficult for superintendents and others at that level to easily articulate the value to their boards and other constituents.

If an effective ongoing communication/education program is not in place, technology leaders will face demands to reduce budgets or they'll find that projects will often go unfunded. The resources that you hoped to get for IT will be rerouted to areas that are more easily understood by the executive team and the public.

Finally, the last reason is to celebrate our successes. Organizations have an emotional culture, and that culture must be carefully managed. When the emotional culture is positive, the organization can move forward more quickly in achieving its goals. One key component in maintaining this emotional state is to celebrate successes. Unfortunately, far too often we become too busy fighting fires or moving on to the next project to step back and enjoy the moment of the success. This is a major mistake, as the energy derived from this celebration is what propels the organization to its next milestone with a high degree of positive anticipation. An effective communications program helps your department or district to support this process of celebration.

As you can see, there are several very practical reasons to develop and maintain an ongoing communications

program within your technology department. As the leader, you must not only set the expectation for this to occur, you must take the lead to see that it actually happens. The real challenge is determining what to say.

Find Your Story

If you review the work plans for most IT departments for the year, you'll probably gasp as you think, "How in the world are they going to get all that done in one year?" That can often be the problem when it comes to telling your story. Sometimes we want to tell our audience everything we are doing, and ultimately, we end up telling them nothing. The most important thing you can do when building your communications plan is to figure out what is core. This is not a new concept by any means. Another way of looking at this is explained quite well in Jim Collins's book, *From Good to Great.* In the book, Collins talks about finding your *hedgehog,* or *core idea.*

You should ask yourself the following questions:

- What is it that you are going to focus on?
- What do you ultimately want to be known for doing well?
- What do you have a passion about?

That is where you begin finding your story. In our district and technology department, we focus technology's role in helping us achieve equity in learning opportunity, developing students as leaders and learners, and keeping instructional significance as core.

It is also important to determine what you are not going to continue talking about. As technology people, we love to talk about how many computers we have installed or routers we have replaced or miles of fiber optic network cable are in place, and so on. The question that always comes to mind when I start reading material

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like this is, "So what?" How is this going to make a difference to my kid and help him/her get into college or find a good job? I think the biggest disservice you can do is to assume your audience cares about what you care about.

Key Elements to Sell It

Sometimes I think it surprises technology leaders that a big part of our jobs is to be sales people and one of the best ways to do that is through our communication programs. Given that this is only one part of a job already filled with numerous requirements, you want to make sure to leverage the investment of time spent in this area. Just like selling any product or service, there are some key factors in making your communications campaign more effective. Here are 10 practical guidelines to consider.

Delivery

1. Identify who your key audiences are—both internal and external
2. Use multiple mediums to deliver the messages
3. Communicate on a consistent and predictable basis
4. Communicate at the level and in the manner they will understand (Put your pride and educational-eze away)

Design/Branding

5. Find powerful visual images to reinforce your key messages—pictures really are worth 1,000 words
6. Students are powerful components in delivering your message when used appropriately
7. Develop a catch phrase that captures the mind and heart and then use it in all communication to help instantly identify your department

Content

8. Focus more on the "why this is helping instruction and students" and less on the technology
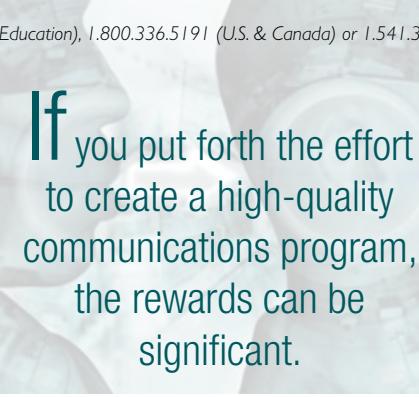
9. Skew the balance to stories (the human side of how it is making a difference) and less news (telling them about progress the department or district is making)
10. Be sure to keep your stakeholders aware of where you are going next. You want them to own the vision and be excited about it.

How did we use some of these guidelines? We built our communications plan with an understanding that our audiences were composed of all stakeholders within our school district and those that reside in our community (with and without children in our schools). Then we decided to build a layered approach to sharing information that used print, video, Internet, surveys, community forums, open-houses, and other special events. As a department, we sponsored these activities to showcase our students and the instructional changes and progress occurring within our district. We usually partner with the instructional services and the public relations departments on these activities because we view them as valued allies.

We chose "Delivering on the Promise" as our theme. Although I have seen that phrase used in several places recently, we have used it for about four years now. We chose it because it has three different levels of meaning for us as a district and community:

1. Most of our technology program is funded through a voter approved technology levy. As a result, there were certain commitments we made to our community when it was passed. The initiatives we have moved forward as a district and department are about keeping those promises.

2. The other promise is the role technology can play in transforming instructional practice in the hands of gifted teachers for extending, supporting and individualizing instruction for students
3. Finally, the last promise is the one inherent in education itself. America is one of the few countries in the world where we guarantee all children the right to a free public education and that right opens the door to a world of opportunity. We intended to deliver on the promise that education holds for all our students.

This did not happen overnight though. It took time to build up to this level, so don't lose heart if you are not there or think, "There is no way I can do all that." The real issue is you have got to start somewhere. Our students play a very active role in helping us manage and deliver a large number of these programs and processes. That has enabled us to maintain and expand the scope of services we provide; however, it also provides them valuable learning opportunities to apply the communication skills they've gained in the classroom in authentic contexts.

What Happens When You Do

Right now technology leaders spend a great deal of time talking about ROI, so inevitably you will want to know "What is the payoff for doing all this work?" If you put forth the effort to create a high-quality communications program, the rewards can be significant.

The first is that your stakeholders, both internal and external, become much more engaged in your work and own the vision you are striving to bring to reality. The importance of this cannot be underestimated. It is not enough for you to have a clear picture of where you want to take your department or district. Everyone else

affected needs not only to know and understand, but to believe they want to go there, too. It makes removing barriers you encounter along the way and finding advocates to support you so much easier.

That brings us to the second benefit. Now that districts and schools are faced with continually dwindling resources, a shared vision yields a stronger support base to generate continued funding. It takes you out of the position of having to constantly resell the vision or justify every single project on its individual merits. After all, there is only so much pie to go around and everything in the district is ultimately competing for it.

As you share information about the instructional and technology programs and progress with your stakeholders, your staff and students feel supported and valued. They know their efforts are recognized and appreciated. The ability to celebrate success is vitally important to maintaining a positive climate within your organization and your communications efforts can be a tremendous asset in achieving that goal. Again, this may not seem like a traditional role for an IT leader, but it is one that a shrewd technology professional will not ignore.

All these benefits combine to create one last systemic benefit—your organization makes significant leaps in achieving its vision. This statement may sound like hyperbole; however, certain fundamental components cannot be ignored when trying to achieve something as lofty as a vision. You must have shared agreement for the direction, an appropriate level of resources, organizational momentum, and staff and leadership commitment. When all these factors align, you can take mammoth strides forward in reaching those aggressive goals you developed. Your communications plan is key in laying a solid foundation for making that possible.

Conclusion

Now that you understand the need, have some strategies to find your story, know how to sell it, and understand what happens when you do. I am sure you are wondering how you begin the planning process for building a communications plan. I suggest you start by answering the following brainstorming questions:

- So what? What did we really accomplish that was important for teaching and learning?
- Why is this medium the best one to use to communicate this message?
- How are students highlighted in a positive way?
- Why would I care about this project or activity if I didn't work for the department?

This approach may sound very simple. Well, actually it is. Communications is about knowing what you want to say and to whom. It is also about forming the habit of discipline to do it on such a regular basis that people expect and enjoy hearing from you.

You will know you have succeeded the first time you miss a deadline and one or more of your stakeholders comment to you they really missed your update. The ultimate compliment is when they say they really look forward to getting them and hope to see another one soon. The grand slam comes when you are in a budget hearing and a community member stands up and quotes your own information as rationale for why your funding should be sustained or increased.

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